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ABSTRACT

Describing the dialectics of theoretical versus applied linguistics and sociological data, this study compares the average achievement in French of Spanish-speaking learners (Chicanos in a southwestern university) with English-speaking monolinguals. Although Spanish and French belong to the Romance Languages and share a great number of cognates and grammatical similarities, three important differences that would not give a Spanish speaker any learning advantages are considered: (1) words for the same things do not always derive from the same Latin words, (2) many words in both French and Spanish come from the same Germanic roots as English vocabulary, and (3) English borrowed much of its vocabulary from French. Discussion of two theories of foreign language acquisition indicates error analysis does not recognize an advantage to Romance language speakers and contrastive analysis appears to appreciate resemblance as a source of confusion rather than help. Non-linguistic aspects of the problem reveal the learners in this study are Chicanos without formal schooling in their native language and bringing the whole sociological aspect of belonging to a bilingual minority into the learning experience. Since the level of French taught is more often school-type than life-type, it does not appear that Spanish-speaking Chicanos have a French language learning advantage over English-speaking monolinguals. (NEC)

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Are Chicanos Better French Learners Than Other American Students?

In a Southwestern university where many Chicano students can be found, teaching a modern language, French, and a classical language, Latin, I was quite naturally encouraged to compare the average achievement in French of the Spanish-speaking learners with the English monolinguals. My rationale was obviously the stereotype popularly fostered by Historical Linguistics: French and Spanish, both issued from Latin should be closer than French and English. I was interested in checking this assumption, made very real to me by my European training in Historical Linguistics, against some theories of language acquisition I became familiar with in this country. This paper will thus not describe an experimental approach of the problem, but rather describe the dialectics of theoretical versus applied linguistics and sociological data.

What is common between Spanish and French?

According to the tradition of linguistic derivation, Spanish and French belong to the Romance languages, while English is classified as a Germanic language. It means that the two languages issued from Latin should share a great number of cognates, based on the same Latin vocabulary, and a large quantity of grammatical similarities. This obvious statement should however be qualified by three objections:

The "Second Choice." Even though Spanish and French come from the same language, words for the same things do not always derive from the same Latin words. The Spanish word for "table," la mesa derives from Latin mēsa,

while the French word for the same object, la table comes from tabella (originally "a writing tablet"). This shows that our two languages did not come from "classical" Latin, but from very ^{Low} ~~High~~ Empire dialects, which were already different from one province to the next. Of course, the Spanish speaker with a large vocabulary may remember la tabla and make the connection, but this takes a very lively imagination. In learning these words the Hispanophone has no advantage.

The whole Roman Empire, France and Spain included, was invaded by the "Barbarians," usually speaking Germanic languages. A greater amount of vocabulary than is usually admitted was then implanted into Proto-French and Spanish. Eventually, some cognates between French and Spanish do not come at all from Latin. It is the case of norte and nord, bote and bateau. It is also obvious that those words are just as close to English, another Germanic language and that a Spanish speaker won't be advantaged over an English speaker to learn them.

It should eventually be mentioned that English borrowed so much of its vocabulary from French after the Norman Conquest and under the Plantagenets that the rate of cognates between the two languages is much higher than could be expected between a Romance and a Germanic idiom. According to this cause an Anglophone would not be so deprived when learning French as other speakers of a non-Romance language. As a matter of fact, to take up again the same example, it is easier for an English speaker to learn la table than for a Spanish speaker.

How can we apply theories of language acquisition?

Contrastive analysis is based on structuralist linguistics and suggests that instruction, after comparison of the two languages, should focus on what in the target language is "deviant" from the native language norm.

This type of analysis would consider speakers of a Romance language as advantaged in learning another one.

Now it would be important to contrast two different attitudes about this statement. The teacher reads it as an injunction to concentrate on the original aspects of the target language, while the learner takes it as an allowance to consider the common part as already acquired. This goes fine until you reach expressive use of the language: it is easy to recognize la plume when you have la pluma in your language, but how do you know whether el lapiz is "supposed to be" a cognate or not? Of course, teachers advise against speaking by translation, but, remember, this is a learner's strategy. To be fair, you have to admit that Contrastive Analysis asked for it.

I will now point out the case of grammatical similarities. It is clear that a complete duplication is quite an asset for everybody concerned. But I will ask bluntly whether, as far as similarity is concerned, 50 percent is better than ~~10~~ 0 percent? The answer is not that obvious. Let's take the case of learning the French relative pronouns. It seems that all students have problems with those. For the English speaker it seems hard that qui and que have nothing in common with who and which. But for the Spanish speaker the temptation of using que in all cases is just too great: think about it, it "has to be" right just half of the time.

Another case that comes to mind is the use of certain prepositions after verbs. It is hard enough for the English speaker to remember that contrarily to "wait," attendre does not take any preposition. But what about the Spanish speaker who has to face the fact that the same word a, or à which is used in one language to introduce a personal object and in the other an indirect object. This is another case when the grammars have too much in common to be helpful.

Eventually, there is the case of the subjunctive. To English-speaking students it is easy to completely forget, but for the Spanish-speaking student, the problem is to overuse it, as subjunctive seems to be more common in their native language than in the target language. So, it is really a matter of choice for the teacher to prefer abuse or ignorance of such an item.

It seems that Contrastive Analysis, with its fixation upon native/target language comparison cannot account for a situation where the two languages are close, too close, in nature and very different in essence. On the other hand, Contrastive Analysis owes its long success to its simplicity, and the fact it spells out a clear strategy of instruction.

Another theory of language acquisition is Error Analysis, derived from Transformational Grammar. In this view, the importance of the native language is decreased; it is thus not obvious to the Error Analyst that speakers of a Romance language will be advantaged in learning another one. In fact, Error Analysis considers that a given language has its own set of difficulties which causes foreign learners to commit mistakes very similar to those made by a native young learner. It advises then the teacher to make an inventory of errors made in the target language, no matter what their linguistic origin and to organize the teaching taking those points as a goal. Of course, this does not sound as logically motivated as Contrastive Analysis (Error Analysis does not name the "guilty" agent) and it does not dictate such a clear strategy of instruction. But we have just seen that, in spite of its apparent common sense, Contrastive Analysis was unable to distinguish between "close" and "dangerously close." Error Analysis, at least, has the merit of defusing that tricky question. As far as French and Spanish at least are concerned, Contrastive Analysis does not seem to supply a valid instruction procedure.

Sociological Aspects of Chicano Students

Out of two theories of foreign language acquisition, the one does not recognize an advantage to Romance language speakers and the other does not appear to be able to appreciate overly resemblance as a source of confusion rather than help. There are also some non-linguistic aspects to the problem.

It should be clearly understood that the topic conveys two specific elements. First of all, it was significant to consider French and Spanish as two Romance languages and to evaluate the consequences of this qualification in terms of propinquity. Secondly, the learners are not considered merely as Spanish speakers, or even as cultural Mexicans. They are Chicanos and bring into the learning experience the whole sociological aspect of belonging to a bilingual minority. Will this create a difference from, let's say, the case of Spaniards who are students of French?

It is clear that the knowledge of the native language is somewhat connected to schooling. Many of the Chicano students, who are in our university, never really got a deep schooling in their native language. They probably never read literary books in Spanish, which is essential in forming a rich vocabulary, so useful to recognize cognates on the "second choice." So that those learners not only do not receive the advantage supposed for Romance language speakers, they do not even reap the rewards of their usually very intense bilingualism in English and Spanish. The reason is that they do not practice two languages, but two different language levels: a scholarly form of English with teachers and a practical common life form of Spanish with relatives and peers. The level of French taught is more often school-type than life-type, so they do not notice all the

similarities that might be obvious to a Mexican learner with intensive schooling in Spanish.

There are also other aspects of belonging to a minority than the depth of language familiarity, and those would also apply to other disciplines than French, of course. What is the attitude concerning the image of learning and the prestige of the "scholar" in the community of school-age Chicanos? Does education assume the same importance in choosing a job as it does in the average American community? I won't answer those questions, but they seem important to me when studying a school problem for a minority.

Conclusion

I have written this article with the following idea: Teaching a language is a people's problem before being a linguistic or pedagogical problem. We too often approach such an endeavor with a stress on scientific assumptions more than on personal facts. What I tried to prove was that, no matter how justified they are, theories of foreign language acquisition are only theories, and they should not take over sociological or mainly human points of view when we are setting our course of instruction.